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Opinion: Big Earthquake Inevitable; Catastrophe Isn't *New Website Feature Provides Preparedness Info/Links*

By Brad Mitzelfelt

Experts tell us a major earthquake hits about every 150 years on the San Andreas Fault. It's been 300 years since the most recent such event on the lower segment of the fault.

But our response to this realization shouldn't be fear or denial. It should be to hasten our preparations for such an event.

To help inform residents about the role they can play in earthquake preparedness, on August 31st I launched a new addition to my website at www.sbcounty.gov/mitzelfelt/earthquake_preparedness.htm. The new page includes links to resources and information such as how to get involved in your community's disaster response team, how to develop a family evacuation plan, how to prepare children for disasters and how to prepare your home for an earthquake.

The idea for the site occurred to me during my recent address to the Regional Earthquake Preparedness Policy Conference of the Southern California Association of Governments. As the newest member of the California Seismic Safety Commission representing local governments, I was asked to address the conference regarding what things our local governments and residents are doing or should be doing to ensure that we're prepared for the inevitable.

Not only do we need to work to minimize potential earthquake damage. We also need to prepare for the aftermath, such as fires, floods, landslides, and disruption of transportation and utility infrastructure, as well as economic impacts. The combination of all of these things threatens to intensify a disaster into a catastrophe.

One important role of county government is to provide leadership and guidance in building the emergency management operational capability of the county, city governments, unincorporated communities, and businesses. Emphasis is on coordination and communication of essential information to the public, and effective planning.

In addition to existing disaster response plans the county has developed, there are a number of committees dedicated to coordinating evacuation and shelter sites, developing transportation and evacuation strategies and routes for each geographic region of the county. High Desert local governments and the Red Cross meet regularly to coordinate planning efforts.

Realistic training exercises are also crucial to readiness. The Golden Guardian disaster simulation is an opportunity for local agencies to test their resources and learn about how to better respond to major disasters.

Golden Guardian 2008 will simulate a 7.8 magnitude earthquake. The exercise will include federal, state and local emergency response organizations, including the State Office of Emergency Services and the State Office of Homeland Security. The exercise will take place during the week of November 10.

As we learned in observing response efforts following Hurricane Katrina, citizens need to understand that it's likely they'll be without basic government services and assistance for several days following a regional disaster. So one of my goals -- both as a member of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors (which governs overall emergency services) and in my capacity representing county governments on the Seismic Safety Commission -- is to inform citizens on how to prepare themselves and their families...and even their neighborhoods. One way you can do that is by getting involved with a Community Emergency Response Team training program.

The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program educates people about disaster preparedness and trains them in basic response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, and disaster medical operations. Using their training, CERT members can assist others in their neighborhood or workplace following an event and can take a more active role in preparing their community. The Department of Homeland Security administers the program nationally and your county government oversees the program locally.

There are currently nine jurisdictions supporting these Citizen Corps Programs within the County, including the Town of Apple Valley, the City of Victorville, and the communities of Helendale, Lucerne Valley, Wrightwood, Phelan, and Pinon Hills. The Lucerne Valley CERT team has already been activated once, during the recent water shortage there. Anyone wanting to get involved with a CERT team should call the County's CERT coordinator at (909) 356-3998, or link to CERT resources through my website.

Brad Mitzelfelt is First District Supervisor for the County of San Bernardino. He was recently appointed a California Seismic Safety Commissioner by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.